

GENERAL WILLIAM WIRT COLBY
BY REBECCA HARDING DAVIS.

The village of Tarrytown, in which I have been for forty years an instructor of youth, (indeed, the only instructor), lies among the closest ranges of the West Virginia hills.

The man whose history I propose to give you has, since his boyhood, been acknowledged by the citizens of Tarrytown as an exceptionable character; they have come (sure test of a hero) to be proud of him, in that he is of a different type from themselves, to humor his little oddities, I sometimes fear, in an unwholesome degree; they point him out to new comers, as soon as they do the spot where a derrick was once sunk for oil (unsuccessfully) in the river bottom; or the big bell in the church cupola, which is indeed to be unkind, our chiefest curiosity, having been brought, it is said, from a Spanish convent. If I did not know the man to be of a humor so sweet and unselfish, and of a humility so admirable, I should fear the effect of this life-long adulation upon him.

I of course regard him from another point of view; having been his teacher, and from the fact that what with fiction against both books and men, I have rubbed off, I hope, much of the provincialism and narrowness of judgment of my neighbors. Yet it is certainly my opinion that William Wirt Colby combines within himself more elements of the heroic nature than any man I have ever known. I feel it the more because I see, as they do not, how difficult it is for any heroic or exceptionable nature to develop in the atmosphere of Tarrytown.

People living in cities, in the highways of thought or business, have no more idea of the way in which customs, and character, and opinions have curdled, as one may say, and hardened in the inland villages, than they have of the rocks reflected for generation after generation in our torpid mill ponds. The three leading families of Tarrytown, their politics, and religion have grown, shut in by the West Virginia mountains, straight up from the times when Lewis Wezel hunted bears along the Ohio, and mad Anthony Wayne laid out his famous road. They (our aristocracy) are the descendants of surveyors and Indian fighters, whom government, just after the revolution, paid in grants of wild lands which now bring them large revenues. The brains of the owners, I am constrained to say, have not been civilized or risen in value, however, with their property. High culture, or "life" in their creed, consists in gaudy dressing, good cookery, card-playing, and unlimited swigging of champagne; the long-ago admixture of Indian blood in their veins, by marriage or otherwise, shows itself in the high cheek bones, swarthy skins, and beetling brows of both men and women. The village is governed by a bench of magistrates—five old men, heads of these families; their fathers held the office before them, their sons will hold it after them using always the same rules. Public schools, of course, are not in our code of civilization. The pillory of the last generation still stands, grass-grown, in the jail-yard, but we have substituted for it the chain-gang. By virtue of the half-dozen slaves in the town, we all held extreme southern ground during the war, and even now, the two or three New Englanders who have built a cotton factory down by the creek are stigmatized as Yankee adventurers, and never by any chance invited to take

a game of cards, or drink champagne with us. It was, by the way, the Tarrytown spirit wider spread before the war, which made West Virginia always appear as the bastard offspring of the Old Dominion, and it was the despised Yankee mill man who at the last split the state in two. I was not so engrossed with the nouns and verbs of dead people as to be blind to the way matters were going with my own. Though, of course, I kept my own counsel.

The Colbys belonged to neither of these two classes in the village.

"Nature," said William Wirt to me one day, "never could make up her mind whether a Colby should be finished off as a genius or a madman."

"Excepting in the case of James," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Yes. Poor James!"

For James Colby was so undeniably common place, so like to everybody else, that I felt no delicacy in saying this to his brother. William was then a lad of eighteen, with a magnificent build of body, a massive head covered with red curling hair, and the same expressive, yet gloomy cast of countenance which characterizes him to-day; a hint of that prophetic sense of ill which belongs [as we read] to those who are set apart by lofty gifts from their fellows. Uneasy, alas, must lie the head that wears the crown.

We were coming up the steep village street I remember, in the cool of the evening, and were just opposite Sloan's shoe store, in which James was employed as shop boy. He was busy at the moment, indeed, lacing up a pair of shoes on Squire Hill, and we saw him on his knees, his round apple-face turned up to the old man with a laugh.

William's countenance changed; he hurried on. "No one can tell what it has cost me to see him fill that position!" he said bitterly. "But there are times when I am forced to acknowledge that it is the one for which his tastes and interest best qualify him."

"There can be little doubt of that," I rejoined. Indifferently, I confess, for I never could feel much interest in the lad who appeared so alien in every way to his family; they reminding one of spirit, while he was pure flesh.

At the moment a young girl, hardly more than a child, came up the shady village street, and to my surprise, James Colby came out of the shoe store, putting on his hat and walked with her, talking earnestly. She was unknown to me. I asked William who she was, remaking upon her singular face.

"You like it?" he said. "There is something too masculine in such steady eyes, to my fancy. She is a daughter of Messenger's, the Yankee capitalist down at the mill. He has taken a queer liking to James, says he would make an able man of business if he were trained. He offered him a place in his New York house yesterday."

"He is going, of course?"

"Of course, unless he's a fool. It's the making of him for life. Though how his salary is to be spared at home, God knows."

I turned away my head, knowing how sensitive the dear lad was on the point of their poverty, and caught sight of old father Colby coming out of the gate of the neglected garden which fronted their house. The house was frame, black and crumbling with age, the garden overgrown with rotting tomatoes and cucumber vines. With the keen love of the Colbys for form and color, and their habit, of which the old man talked so much, of going back to Nature for strength, "drawing life from the breasts of the eternal Mother," people often wondered they did not occasionally drive a nail, or pull up a weed about the place. But I perceived much of the simplicity and helplessness of infants about them; they were literally content to rest in the great mother's arms. Always excepting James.

The setting sun touched the old man's white hair and commanding figure with fine effect as he joined us. He had overheard our last words.

"I don't think that James will accept the offer," he said, in the deliberate tone with which he weighed all subjects. "In truth his weekly wages are almost our sole resource in paying bills which I suppose accumulate in the progress of every family; and James, of all my children, has always had a keen appreciation of these petty matters; the give and take of meat and milk, and dollars and cents. In my mind," with the rare melancholy smile which gave to his face the presentment of some ancient philosopher looking again through the flesh at the vagaries of the world, "these dull commercial facts but serve to clog life, as barnacles do the vessel on her way to the goal."

We walked on. I had always a keen delight in listening to the Orphic utterances of the old man. They were vague, it is, true, and inapplicable to daily life, but they gave you the impression of having ascended a height and breathed a rarer atmosphere. I should have mentioned that Colby had been a clergyman, whose sensitive conscience had led him into half a dozen Protestant sects. Just now he was outside any pale, and consequently any pulpit.

"It has been suggested to me," he said mildly, "that I should make money by lecturing in Ohio this winter. I have no time to make money. I am no teacher, only an humble seeker for eternal truth."

"Then you *won't* lecture, father?"

"No, my son."

It was James who had joined us unnoticed. I never noticed as strongly before the contrast between his brother and this lad with his bright, cheerful, decided manner and look. He attacked the great varieties of his father's talk with the same business-like snap with which he would have tied a pair of shoes.

We had reached the end of the steep-ascending street. The village suddenly ceased; below us lay a deep wooded chasm, on the other side of which towered the mountains like a rampart before the soft purple sunset. Even to my unimaginative mind, the effect was that of glory walled in and unattainable. The old man and William looked at it with kindling eyes turned often toward each other. James, I say, had his back to all the brilliance and beauty, and was looking down the quiet village street along which Messenger's daughter was passing. He turned sharply, glancing at the Colby house. His mother, a feeble, gentle old woman, was sitting on the porch; Julia and Berenice, his elder sisters, were in the garden walks, culling flowers. More beautiful, witty women it would be had to find than Julia and Berenice Colby, though long past their prime; of the class, too, one feels should forever cull flowers. But James, I felt instinctively, was counting up their meat and milk bills.

Mr. Colby pointed to the half-hidden light across the chasm. "So Adam might have looked back to Eden when the gates were forever closed behind him," he said.

William drew a long breath. "It does not represent any heavenly rest to me. Rather the action, the endeavor, the world from which I am shut out!" He threw out both hands toward the surrounding hills. "They are my jail bounds!" he cried. "I lose my breath in this village and among these human fossils. My brain in an exhausted receiver. Only let me escape, and I will come back with royal gifts for you all!" The strong light struck full on his pale face as he turned it, full of fire and energy upon us. I felt that standing there on the edge of the precipice, facing life, it was a most heroic daring figure.

"Then you won't go into White's drug shop, William?" said James, slowly folding up a pocket-book he held.

It was little wonder that look of disgust crossed the lad's face, but in a minute he gave a tolerant smile. "Oh James! James! What a fellow you are! Must you bring the smell of assafoetida here?" His fine eyes were wet. The sunset, the glimpse into the future had made this one of the supreme moments of life to him.

"White's offer was very fair one."

William walked indignantly away.

"Why should we discuss the question now, my son?" said Mr. Colby gently.

"Mr. Messenger has sent to say that he must have my answer to-night, and there are several things I must consider."

"You must consider simply the interest of your future life, James. The commercial field appears to me clogged and limited. But certain natures have limitations which confine them to it. It is for you to judge your own nature and your own interest. Those are the only points to influence your decision."

"They don't appear to me to be the only ones, sir." The boy stood twisting his pocket-book for some time, looking thoughtfully at the Colby house, at his father, at Messenger's cottage by the gate of which the girl still waited.

Mr. Colby resumed his conversation with me. "He will soon go," sadly nodding toward William. "The hills will not confine him long, and it is better so, better so! The strong swimmer should breast the waves. Where are you going, James?"

"It is time to close the shop. Half-past six."

"James, I have been thinking of getting a pair of half-high shoes at Sloan's. These boots cramp my feet in walking."

"Very well, sir. Number 7's?" stooping to look closer.

"But your wages are probably paid up, my son?"

"They can go on next week's account."

"Then you will not accept Messenger's offer?"

"No," with a queer smile. "I will not accept it."

After he was gone, Mr. Colby continued his stroll, and William remained with me. It was then that I gained a knowledge of the secret of his life.

"You spoke of woman's faces awhile ago," he said suddenly. "There is my idea of the highest type of womanly beauty."

It was his cousin, Jenny Vance, an orphan who had long lived in their family, who was passing along the distant street. "When I come back with my royal gifts," laughing and blushing ingenuously, "I shall know where to lay the crown."

I pressed his hand, but did not speak. I felt that the boy had a purpose in giving me his confidence. What that purpose was I soon understood.

That night William Wirt Colby left Tarrytown without a word of farewell. People said that this was because of some trifling bills for which he was in arrears, but his father and I know his aims to be of the highest. Those aims were soon developed. He was in Nicaragua fighting with Walker; a year or two later, under Garibaldi, leading the legions who struggled for their freedom.

"Wherever man is busied in working off his overplus of courage and strength or in helping his brother man, there is my boy!" his father used to say proudly. His letters, written as with a fiery pen, were to me like the burning war-torch, sent by the ancient

Gaels one to the other, calling me back to my youth and dreams of lofty emprise. It was well that the old man had this lad's noble life to serve as stimulus and cordial to his own as it ebbed. There was little at home to nerve him. Year after year there were his wife, Julia and Berenice, and Jenny Vance going through the same dull round which belongs to people of fine tastes, and high callings, when their pockets are empty. The old man indeed carried this refinement of taste into his appetite, and I fear that the coarse meat and potatoes, which were all that James' wages could furnish, disturbed his habitual calm more than we would expect in a philosopher.

I felt that the girl Jenny Vance had been tacitly and secretly left to me as a sacred charge, and kept a watch over her. The first day I observed her closely, I was impressed by her red lips, blue eyes, and a winning sort of general pulpiness, and I confess that, after years of acquaintance, she only conveyed to me the idea of lips and eyes,, and a pulpy winsomeness. But she was William's betrothed, and set apart in the eyes of all Tarrytown. For the village followed now with pride the far-off career of its hero.

Late one summer evening James beckoned me across the street to the shop door.

"There is a letter from William! He is coming home, and bids Jenny be ready for the marriage." There was a fever of pleasure. There could be no doubt of his affection for his brother, or that, so far as he was competent, he appreciated him. The time William had set for his return was the first of September, but that month passed; October and November, and he did not appear. The poor little bride began to look pale, and grew hysterical; I even was uneasy, having heard that William was so near to our neighborhood as Columbus, Ohio, where in fact he had a public reception as one of Garibaldi's heroes.

It was on the first Sunday of December that he arrived. From the moment he alighted from the open phaeton which he drove, he appeared to fill the town. There was something brusque about him. His gigantic build, his loud voice, the marshal bearing, the uniform, the diamonds sparkling on his broad shirt front all to me were hints of the large liberal life he had led. James, puny and sallow, with his shoulders bowed over the desk, had ideas in keeping with his body.

"Will has been drinking – drinking hard," he said anxiously, as we followed him up the street.

"Such a life of daring must require occasional stimulus," I said.

"Poor Jenny!" said James. He always showed a pig-headed obstinacy, standing firm upon all his own petty opinions.

"Is Jenny ready?" cried William, turning his eager eyes on us. "To-day? Yes. The wedding must be to-day or never. You don't know the reason why, eh?" with a laugh.

Then he confided to us, that owing to certain heavy debts which he owed in Virginia, he could not set foot in the State except on Sunday.

"Why, God bless you, this is the Sheriff!" slapping one of the gentlemen who accompanied him heartily on the back. "He came along in hopes I'd be delayed over twelve to-night. Can't arrest on Sunday, you know. You took him for a groomsman, hey?"

"Oh, William!" cried James stopping short, red with shame and anger.

But his brother silenced him by a stern look. "Do you think a man who has faced the cannon's mouth will quail before old uncle Petrey, though he be a sheriff?"

And so the lad went through the day, gay, rollicking, debonair as though he had not been the victor of a hundred fights. It is a certain intoxication of blood which follows great deeds perhaps. He even approached the sacred mystery of marriage as though it had been an airy jest, though doubtless his soul was secretly moved by emotions of which we know nothing.

"Jenny's bloom's a little gross-beefy, eh?" whispering to me after we left the church. "Blondes are apt to go that road. You should see the Italian women, doctor. Like their wines; delicate but pretty; rich, hey? But Jenny's well enough, and I'd promised. A promise, you know!"

I had an insight then into the magnanimity which brought him back.

"I fear," I said to James the next day, (they got off safely on Sunday) "that William has made a sacrifice."

He was tying up a package of slippers at the time. "A sacrifice? A sacrifice? He could marry the woman he loved since he was a boy." Something in his look surprised me. It followed Mr. Messenger's barouche, which his daughter drove slowly past at the moment. I remembered an idle report I had once heard of an odd friendship existing between these old schoolmates. But of course it never could amount to anything. James was but junior partner in Sloan's shop, which always was, and would be a small concern, and Mary Messenger was not only the largest heiress in the county, but a girl of exceptional grace and culture. James Colby was shrewd enough to understand the place his lack of education and means must give him beside her.

However, I felt glad when she went back to Boston soon after William's marriage. If James had any such absurd fancy in his head, it was as well the cause was removed.

Two years afterward she returned for a short time, still unmarried, and then I found that the fancy, absurd as it was, had taken possession of James. He was known in the village now as a steady-going, ordinary business fellow, peculiarly obliging and cheerful in the shop and out of it. Now, however, I observed that he began to dress a little more, to frequent the dances, evening parties and social gatherings, where he would probably meet Miss Messenger. I do not know whether he was conscious of the contrast which he

presented to the other young men who formed a little court about her. The years he had spent in the shop had enabled them to distance him hopelessly in every way.

"There's a young fellow who had thrown away his life," her father said to me one evening. He had the chance to make a man of himself once, but he has chosen to grow into a slouching village booby."

Miss Messenger was beside her father at the moment. She said nothing, but I noticed that she stood watching James for a long time afterward, and I thought I had never seen a sadder face than hers. I wondered at the time if it were possible that she would have been willing to marry him had her father consented.

How that may have been I never knew, for it was in the winter following that we heard of her marriage in New York, and curiously enough, it was to a man who had begun business in the position which James had refused, but who was now partner in the firm. Knowing what a mortal stroke such a blow as this would have been to his brother's sensitive nature, I watched James Colby closely for some time. But he did not miss a day at the shop, fitted on shoes, and made change, was ready as before with his laugh for anybody who had a joke. He may have been a trifle haggard, and the cheerfulness was perhaps restless. But I satisfied myself that no profound emotion could exist under so common-place a demeanor, and unvarying attention to business. At this time, too, I had other matters to absorb my attention. Sumpter had fallen, and the country was in arms. Even in Tarrytown a company of young men had been clandestinely armed and despatched to join Lee. James Colby openly sympathized with the Federal side from the first. I was, however, surprised when he came to me one day, and told me that he had obtained an appointment as lieutenant in a loyal regiment forming in Wheeling.

For the first time it occurred to me that the man might feel the need of a friend and sympathy in other matters than trading shoes. Though he approached even this crisis of life in the commercial spirit.

"I am glad of the chance to strike one blow in life for a great cause," his quiet face actually lighting into a resemblance of his brother's. "One grows tired before middle age of this seeking to do the duty that lies nearest to you!"

"But the cause may cost your life?" I said.

He nodded, saying nothing, yet I fancied he would not regret it.

"Of course," he resumed in his usual calm tone, "I have other claims which I am bound to regard before that of even my country. But my pay and the receipts from the shop will keep the family from want while I am gone. I was in reference to that I wished to advise with you," and then entered upon a statement of his affairs.

The pay and receipts would barely keep them from want. But his conscience was ready to be satisfied. I would have thought some pain or raging fever of the blood urged him to begone, if it had been William Colby. But it was James, a different matter.

How different I felt before the day was over. We had a political meeting that evening; drowsy, as was natural, for we approached death itself in a sleepy way in Tarrytown. To my amazement and that of the village, William Wirt Colby entered the hall in the midst of our consultations. He came with the whole war about him, as one might say, swathed in courage as in a garment. His voice was like a trumpet call; he took charge of us as a soldier might a flock of sheep; his very presence ensured protection, strength, victory. He was on his way to take command of a battalion in a sea-board city. A battalion? Listening to him with my soul kindled, and blood on fire, it seemed to me the hosts of the Republic could find no leader so fit as this hero, dear to me as though he had been the son of my loins.

"I have brought my dear ones to leave with you," he said in conclusion. "If I perish, my wife and children are yours, my friends! the dearest of all legacies!"

The enthusiasm of the crowd was great, though Tarrytown had called itself rebel; but Tarrytown generally waited for somebody to develop its opinions for it. I joined him as he went down the street.

"James goes with you?" I said.

"James? Nonsense! What would *he* do in the army? James' place is here, I showed him that plainly enough this afternoon. Fact is, there are three children beside Jenny to add to the family, and if we both go, they'll starve. It will take my pay for a year to stave off my creditors. Poor Jem! Fancy him in the disguise of a soldier!" laughing. But he grew grave as he assured me that the army was seriously weakened by this irruption of volunteers, men who fancied zeal could take the place of every other qualification.

General Colby (for he had received a brigadier's commission as soon as he announced his intention of taking part in the war) took with him several of our foremost young men. The town was in such an uproar of martial ardor with his presence for a few days, that I had almost forgotten to notice that his brother was not among these gallant young heroes. When they were gone, however, and the village had subsided to its usual quiet, I observed him busy as usual, behind the counter in the shoe shop. Meeting him that evening on his way home to the old house which was now fairly swarming with inmates, I told him I was sorry he had been thwarted in his wish. "Though really," I said, "your work seems to be here."

"Yes, it is here," he said quietly. "There are not many men who are allowed to work – die for a great cause."

It was certainly General Colby's fate to be the standard-bearer of liberty in his day, in all the great contests of the world. He passed through many of our battles unharmed, though his headlong bravery carried him into the thickest of the fight.

It is not my purpose to follow his military career; no doubt you have all recognized him already as a hero well-known to the nation, the idol of his men while in service, and the leader of countless political meetings since the war. For it was impossible for a nature like William Wirt Colby's to shackle itself by the cramping, peaceful routine of domestic life. When peace was declared, he espoused the political creed of the party which seemed to him to represent human rights, and threw himself into the never-ceasing contest with tyranny, fighting with pen and tongue as he had done with the sword. Surely this was best. He was censured by many for leaving his family in Tarrytown without any adequate support. But the great mission which God had given him, in my opinion, exonerated him from petty duties. Was it for the Argonauts to give up their search for the golden fleece in order to buy the marketing for their families?

My record is nearly finished.

During the years that have elapsed since the war, General Colby has returned from time to time to Tarrytown, always bringing with him handsome presents, not only for his family, but this townspeople. It was through his efforts as a lobby member that the railroad was brought finally to Tarrytown. When he takes his wife with him on occasional visits to Washington or the watering places, no lady, I am informed, appears in more costly or suitable raiment. But his uncertain mode of life, and the large drains made upon his purse by the charitable and public enterprises which he represents, make it inexpedient for him to hamper himself with a house and family in Washington.

Old Mrs. Colby died a year or two ago, and Berenice married, which lessened the number of the family. As living in Tarrytown is cheap, and James remained single, his income from the shoe shop has always sufficed to maintain the six remaining in comparative comfort. Now, however, it will be different, owing to an incident with which I may as well close this necessarily incomplete sketch.

The railway track has been finished to Tarrytown only since last October, and the cars running about half that time, so that naturally their arrival is yet an event of daily interest and curiosity to us. A little crowd is apt to gather about the station in the evening. About a month ago I was there with several others, among the rest, James Colby. James, although one of our most energetic business men, had grown of late years into a genial fellow, ready for hearty comradeship with his neighbors.

We had strolled to where the railway makes a sudden turn about the hill. On one side, a declivity slopes gradually into the chasm. Beyond the valley the mountains rise abruptly; on this evening they were shrouded with the fog, and had the appearance of walling in the sunset sky. It was, curiously, on this very spot, and on just such an evening that years ago James and William Colby made their choice of life: James, the part of a shoe clerk; and William, that of a helper of his brother-men. But none of us were thinking of anything

beyond the fact that the train was over-due nearly twenty minutes. James had just taken out his watch to time it,, when we heard it come thundering up. At the same moment the figures of two or three women and children appeared on the track, just on this side of the bend. Who they were, no one could tell in the dim light; but that they mistook the whistle of the approaching train for that of the coaling engine which had just rushed down the switch below, was evident, for they stood quite still, calmly looking at the sunset, one of the women pointing to it stooping, over the children.

There was no time even for a cry; on the instant the engine flashed into sight, the next, James Colby was on the track, pushing them down the bank. Then I saw a black figure taken up, whirled into the air, and dashed, with the life broken out of it, at my feet.

We laid him on the bank; the train came to a stop, the crowd with pale faces stood off and held each other back, to give him air. I suppose it was what you would call an heroic act, yet I confess, with all the sudden terror, and pang of seeing him fling away life, it did not stir my blood as one of his brother's fiery words would have done. He did not know who the women were; he had no glowing thoughts to inspire him; he did it and died, because it was the simple, natural, right thing to do, just as he had gone on selling shoes year after year.

Doctor Cowen was there and examined him, but only for a moment; he shook his head and stood back. Uncle Joe, an old colored fellow to whom James had been kind, had taken his head in his arms and raised it gently so as to catch the fading light of the sun, but his eyes were dull and saw nothing. Just then the women whom he had saved came up, still stunned and hardly knowing yet what had happened; one of them went straight to him.

"Who was it? Who was it?" she said. When she saw, she kneeled down on the road and took his hands in hers.

"James!" she called, "James!"

He opened his eyes; there was a strange lighting in his face, but he could not speak for a little while. "Was it for you I did it, Mary? I am glad of that," he said quietly.

He held her hands tightly in his, and his dull eyes turned from hers to the far-off light, and his lips moved as if he would have spoken, but he did not. The next moment Joe laid him back softly on the grass, dead; his hands still holding hers so tightly that we could scarcely loose them.

James Colby has been much missed in Tarrytown; more than I should have thought possible, knowing how limited was his scope of character. But there can be no doubt that he was a good citizen, and a most respectable person in every point of view. I was conscious of the extent to which he would be missed when his brother came on to attend the funeral.

"Of course," he said to me, in that large generous voice of his, "I do not blame James for the manner of his death, he had no time to consider. If he had had time to consider, and could have remembered how great a burden he flung on my hands, and how important is the work for the country I have to do in the coming Presidential struggle, I doubt if he would have acted in so very rash a manner."

I had hardly reasoned out the matter then. But now, feeling how the public career of General Colby has been hampered during the past campaign, by the necessity of providing for his family, I am almost forced to pronounce his brother's death a most unfortunate mistake.

from *Wood's Household Magazine*, vol. xii, no. 1, January, 1873, p. 12-19.